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# THE WHOLE TOWN'S TALKING

An Experimental Venture in Educational Television

Fund for Adult Education
Television Project
WOI-TV
Ames, Iowa
1952

"I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome direction, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion through education."

Thomas Jefferson.

The Whole Town's Talking is an experiment in mass education through the medium of television. The program type is discussion. The field of interest is the democratic process. The participants are the people themselves.

In the seven weeks this operation has been in progress three major discoveries have been made:

1) The people themselves, not experts, but the people themselves, talking, thinking, coming to personal decisions on the problems of their community, are the material for an exciting and entertaining television program.

2) This program offers a new and effective way to get expert knowledge to the people who are in most need of that knowledge.

3) By using such a program as the springboard to organized community activity, television can be made to serve--in a totally unique fashion--the fundamental processes of democracy.

These discoveries are the result of investigation and experiment by the staff of the Fund for Adult Education TV project, with the cooperation of station WOI, several departments of Iowa State College, and several hundred citizens of a dozen Iowa communities. We have reached our conclusions slowly. Our ideas have changed as our experience has grown. Our primary duty was the creation of a television program. But The Whole Town's Talking is much more than a series of half hour shows. It can be the center, the "sparkplug", of an integrated process of discussion, decision making, and action on a state-wide or even nation-wide basis.

Perhaps the best way to indicate where we now stand in this total process is to tell the story of our first telecast, on school reorganization which was broadcast over WOI-TV on Thursday, January 3, at 8:00 p.m.

## I -- TACTICS: THE PRE-SHOW

The basic idea of The Whole Town's Talking is to bring together representatives of an Iowa community to discuss a serious local problem, to look at the alternatives, weigh the costs, and arrive at a decision on a course of action.

After talking with Iowa State College experts in various fields and referring to the community section of the project outline completed in September, it was decided to begin the series with a problem which is local in importance, yet national in scope: school district reorganization.

There are in Iowa over 4700 independent and consolidated school districts. Of these, 833 support high schools. The median high school has an enrollment of about 75. This means the average high school in Iowa has a rather limited curriculum at a rather high per pupil cost.

It has been suggested by various experts that more efficient use of educational facilities could be made by the formation of larger administrative units. Thus two or more small districts would join together to elect a single school board which would organize the pooled educational facilities as it saw fit. This process of reorganization could mean a better all around education at a lower per pupil cost. In order to receive the fullest benefits from such a process, at least some of the presently operating high schools would -- eventually -- have to close.

There are many rural citizens in Iowa who feel that the closing of the small town high schools would be a calamity of the first order. A student transferring from one of these schools to a larger school in another town would be forced to travel long distances on poor highways, would lose out on social and athletic activities, would no longer have the values of individual attention and "home" environment.

Then, too, there are many rural people who insist that the economic life of the small community is directly dependent on the presence of the high school and its associated activities. There is much factual data to show this statement to be not altogether true. The fight, however, has gone on in Iowa over a period of years - with "experts" pointing out the many advantages of the larger school and many of the townspeople insisting on the intangible benefits of the small school and value of local control of the small district.

The town selected for the first program was Cambridge, Iowa. It was chosen because it has the problem of declining high school enrollment and high per pupil costs, because the future of the town seems closely tied to the future

of the school, and because we had been told that this Story County town of 600, thirteen miles south and east of Ames, represented the worst type of community apathy.

Our first step was to organize a general meeting of the town. Working through Professor Glenn Holmes, our chief advisor from the Iowa State College Department of Vocational Education, the school superintendent at Cambridge was contacted. He went to his school board, explaining to them that WOI-TV wanted the town of Cambridge to go on television and discuss its school problem. The following day our production team went to Cambridge to hear the school board's answer.

Cambridge lies in the midst of farm fields. It is far off the main highway on a gravel back country road. A railroad line runs through the fields, passing one end of the town. There is the main street: lumber yard, bank, barber shop, general store, garage, Masonic Hall, a restaurant, a tavern. The school is one turn to the left and down a block. As we go up the steps, a sleepy dog gets up and walks slowly away from the entrance of the two story red brick building.

Inside, the superintendent, Mr. Harsha, greets us, takes us to his tiny office. We ask him about the school board's answer to our request. He fumbles a moment, then gives us their answer. Their answer is: No.

We ask him why. He says that Cambridge has had much unfavorable publicity because of its school. The board feels that the television program will be more of the same -- another black eye for Cambridge. He hints that people from "higher up" are trying to push Cambridge into abandoning its school. The town, he concludes, would not be a very good subject for a television show.

At this point, our producer, Bob Shayon, said he would be interested in talking to the head of the school board. The superintendent made a phone call, and in a few minutes, Harry Cairns, a big, poker-faced man came into the room.

Bob Shayon began to explain the project. WOI-TV, he said, was trying to prove to the world that democracy really works in the local community and that the people of the small town have the ability and the integrity to face their problems honestly and come to intelligent decisions on them. We had chosen Cambridge because it was a typical town and because it had a problem. We did not care what Cambridge did about its problem so long as it recognized it for what it was and tried to deal with it honestly. Then Bob Shayon asked Harry Cairns if it were possible to arrange a town meeting so that the people could decide, in the democratic way, if the town wanted to go on television.

Mr. Cairns said yes it was possible. The meeting was set for Thursday night, two days hence, in the high school room of the school.

At eight o'clock on Thursday evening, 56 people of Cambridge were seated at desks in a large room on the second floor of the school. Someone said the church choir was practicing and they would be over later on. The Masons sent word they were entertaining guests and could not come but would send a representative.

Because we thought this meeting might be an interesting piece of "Americana", we arranged to have a sound film made of the entire proceeding. We were not quite certain what effect cameras and lights would have on these people. Nor were we quite sure what we would learn from the film. As it turned out, this film gave us the basis for all of our pre-show tactics and for the format of the television show itself.

The school superintendent introduced Mr. Shayon who explained to the group, in much the same fashion he had explained to Harry Cairns, what WOI-TV was trying to do. He said the people present would have a chance to vote on whether they would like representatives of the town to appear on television. But first, Mr. Shayon said, it was necessary for us to determine whether the town would do for our purposes. In order to have a program there must be differences of opinion. It was up to the town to prove that it could provide representatives for each of the alternative views of the school problem.

Before the meeting we had been told that no one in the town would talk about the school. It was too much of a "sore spot." And if there was talk it would certainly be confined to careful expressions of majority opinion. We would hear no dissident elements, we were told.

It is easy to imagine our pleasure, therefore, when the first man to speak said he was in favor of some kind of school district reorganization, a viewpoint which, to say the least, is not very popular in Cambridge. It took some time to get a general discussion started. And it is true that most of the talk skirted the real issues. But the people of Cambridge, the typical apathetic community, the community which did not wish to be reminded of its problem, did get up and for two hours did talk about the problem of their school. And at the end of the meeting they voted 55 to 1 to appear on our television program.

A few days later we viewed the film of the meeting. We watched the men and women of this town stand up and talk about their school and their community. We saw their nervousness, their hesitation, their embarrassment. It had probably been a long time since anyone had asked them what they thought -- and stayed for the answer. When Larry Gardner got up and cracked his knuckles and said -- "A man came around here a couple years ago and said all the whistle stops will have to go. Well, I don't believe that. I don't believe that's true at all" -- when we saw this, we were seeing a magnificent bit of acting by a man who had spent a lifetime preparing to play just one part -- himself.

We found prejudices in Cambridge, and much misinformation. But above all we found honesty and simplicity and great dignity--all material for a new kind of television program.

I have tried to describe in some detail our experience with the town of Cambridge. I have tried to give some idea of the excitement of these first events as we lived them and as we feel they will appear on the television screen. But I have spoken at this length because we of the Fund for Adult Education project feel that we have found much more than just the material for good television. We believe that we have found a method which, if properly exploited, can become a new and tremendously effective tool in the re-education of a people in the processes of their democracy.

When we entered Cambridge, we found an apathetic dispirited community, afraid to discuss its problems. In the past few weeks we have watched a ferment grow in this town. We have watched people as they began to talk about their problems -- in the open -- for the first time. This talk need not -- must not -- end with the television program. At this moment we do not know what direction this process of involvement will take. But this much we do know: By using the glamour and the excitement of present day television, we can -- literally -- start a whole town talking.

Now that I have given some idea of the material out of which we hope to create The Whole Town's Talking, let us consider the project's second responsibility. Each week our program must present the facts about a particular subject -- in our first show it is the problem of the rural high school. This means there must be a clear definition of that problem and statements of the alternative ways in which it may be solved.

We do not pretend that television can alone carry the full burden of subject matter presentation. Perhaps the greatest thing television can do is to stimulate the viewer to do his own researching, or at least make him more receptive to those in the field who are trying to give him the results of their research. There is probably no real alternative to the printed word as a conveyer of ideas. We do, however, realize our responsibility to present some of the more crucial issues of the subjects of our discussions. This presentation calls for the use of expert knowledge.

It would be possible for subject matter experts to appear on the program itself. Indeed, it is possible to make a whole program out of a discussion by experts. Since it is our feeling that the key value of the program lies in the discussion of community problems by people who are personally involved, it seems to us that The Whole Town's Talking can make the most effective use of expert knowledge off, rather than on, stage.

At our first town meeting in Cambridge, Glenn Holmes was introduced to the audience as an expert in problems of the rural high school who was present not to represent a point of view or give a lecture, but merely to answer any questions of fact. During the course of the evening, in response to questions from the group, he gave short explanations of the meaning of school district

reorganization and consolidation, as well as interpretations of the rights of local school school boards under recent actions of the state legislature.

At the conclusion of our first meeting, Bob Shayon explained to the people that we would have the film of the discussion processed and then we would come back and give them a chance to see themselves on the screen. Ten days later our second Cambridge meeting was held in the high school room of the school. Over a hundred people were present. When the film began, there was a chorus of nervous laughter. But after a few minutes, the group became quite attentive -- more attentive, I should say, than at the last Hollywood production they had witnessed at the local movie house.

When the film had ended, the group were asked for their impressions. There were one or two embarrassed remarks by individuals who had used excessive gestures in their speeches, and one man who had monopolized much of the early discussion said that he was "going to keep his mouth shut" in the future. After this the mayor of Cambridge stood up and said that some of his ideas on school reorganization had changed since he had seen the film. This led into a general discussion of the school problem which seemed to be somewhat more thoughtful than the first discussion ten days before. The questions brought up were quite specific and showed that the first discussion and the film had made a real impact on the thinking of the people. Now they wished to know something about the curriculum at a larger high school, and just what did it cost to send their children to the school in Cambridge. Glenn Holmes answered some questions, but as we had hoped, many more questions were brought up than answered.

A few days after this second meeting, twelve people from Cambridge were chosen to appear on our first television program. These twelve are above the average in their ability to express themselves and in their positive attitudes toward the problem. But on the whole they represent a fair cross-section of the thinking of the town.

Twelve others were chosen to take part in a closed circuit broadcast on November 15. The purpose of this "dry-run" was to help us work out certain technical problems as well as to teach us something of the correct psychological handling of our participants. The main problem, of course, is to keep the values of freshness and spontaneity and at the same time present a fair amount of factual information -- all in the compressed space of a single half hour.

To achieve this effect of concentration, we invited our second group of twelve to meet for an entire day with college experts on the school problem. On Wednesday, November 14, from 9:30 in the morning until 5:00 in the afternoon, these twelve -- a banker, a farmer, two housewives, two school teachers, a student, and several business men -- discussed their school situation with Professor Martelle Cushman of the Iowa State College Department of Vocational Education and Mr. Ralph Imes, our program moderator.

During the morning period they were exposed to a series of maps which showed the size and nature of the Cambridge community in terms of trade area, and church and school attendance. In the discussion which followed, some of the real problems of their school were brought out, with facts and figures supplied by Mr. Cushman. Alternative solutions to these problems were considered, along with what each solution might cost the town in terms of tangible and intangible values.

In the middle of the afternoon session an odd thing happened. The group had been discussing the reasons why the school had lost so many tuition paying pupils in the last few years. Most of the group insisted it had nothing to do with the town or the school, but was the result of "personal things." Then one of the young men said that he knew why the parents of these children had taken them from Cambridge and placed them in neighboring schools. The reason, he said, "is our bad reputation. We're known as a tough town. We've got a juvenile delinquency problem and we're not doing anything about it. If we want to get these kids back into the Cambridge school, we've got to do something about our reputation." This statement, and the short discussion on juvenile delinquency which followed, indicates the greatest penetration of our process, in terms of creating an atmosphere in which these people could face and discuss the real problems of their town.

In the last few minutes of our Wednesday discussion, the group again brought up questions about the alternative solutions to their problem. At this point, Bob Shayon asked them if they would like to talk with people from towns which had faced their problem and actually done something about it. They said, yes, they would like very much to talk with such people. "When can we see them?" one man asked. "Tomorrow night on the program," said Bob Shayon.

To provide additional factual material, we had located three towns, all similar to Cambridge, which had been faced with similar school problems, and had made and carried our decisions on them. A representative from each town was chosen to take an informal poll to determine how pleased the town was with the solution it had adopted. These individuals arrived in Ames on Thursday morning-- Julius Black from Kelly, Iowa, a town which had decided to close its high school and send the children to neighboring schools, Mrs. Griffiths from Lisbon, Iowa, a town which had voted down a possible reorganization, and Mrs. Vaupel from Ashton, Illinois, a town which had, four years ago, voted for reorganization with several neighboring districts, something which no town in Iowa has yet done.

One more guest was invited, Wayne Hill, a businessman from Pella, Iowa. This man had graduated from the Cambridge High School some twenty years ago. He was asked to come on the program to tell out of his personal experiences how he felt now about the advantages or disadvantages of his education in Cambridge.

These four people, then, were brought to give Cambridge the benefit of their personal experiences and the experiences of their towns in solving a problem similar to the one Cambridge now faced: declining enrollment, limited curriculum, rising per pupil costs. They did not meet with the Cambridge people until dinner on Thursday evening, and then only socially. To increase the spontaneity of the broadcast, there was no discussion of the school problem until the program itself began, later that evening.

With the exception of a half hour warm up period just before the start of the show, we had now gone through all of our pre-show tactics. Before I go into a discussion of the actual production, I should like to consider the last element in the development of our total pre-show process: outside involvement.

Present at our first town meeting in Cambridge was Carlyle Gauger, Story County Extension Agent. After the meeting he spoke to us, saying that he was interested in forming a group to discuss public affairs issues. He thought that the film showing Cambridge people talking about their community problems could be used to get people in other parts of Story County interested in forming such a group. We suggested to him the possibility of assembling a group to watch our television broadcasts and hold discussions based on what they had seen, examining the problems as they appeared in their own communities. Mr. Gauger was very enthusiastic about this idea and promised his full cooperation. At 8:00 on the night of November 15, 35 men and women from all over Story County took seats in front of a moniter in Studio A of Station WOI. They knew little of what they were about to see. They had, in fact, no idea that a television broadcast was about to take place in a studio just across the hall.

We hoped to learn a good many things from the reactions of this first of our "town-talk" groups. But basically the problem was this: Cambridge was talking about its problem. Would this talk, on television, start other communities discussing their own similar problems?

## II - PRODUCTION: THE DRY-RUN

WOI-TV television truck going down highway 69...Turns left on to gravel road... Turns left again past road sign: Cambridge, 1 mile...Drives through railroad underpass...As it pulls up in front of school house, sign on truck side comes into focus:

The Whole Town's Talking
Town Tonight: Cambridge, Iowa
Subject: School Reorganization
Moderator: Ralph Imes

dissolve into school room

The show begins on film. The impression is simple: WOI-TV is bringing television to the towns. The dissolve takes us into our studio school room set. Fifteen people, eleven from Cambridge, four from other towns, are seen at desks talking to one another. On the walls of the room are drawings and posters from the Cambridge school. George Washington looks down from one corner, a safety poster from another. On the floor and on chairs at the sides are children from Cambridge. The television eye moves slowly around the room, comes to rest on a middle aged man with glasses, his hand cocked to his ear as he listens to the woman next to him.

A voice says: Well, I see O. M. Lewis made it. Glad to see him here tonight. He's still got his corn to get in. Corn's late this year and O. M.'s a little worried about it. If he's left his farm to come and talk about the school problem, it really must be important to him.

A sign is superimposed over Lewis' face. It reads: O. M. Lewis, Farm Bureau Member. The sign is tacked on a mail box. A hand reaches into the box and pulls out a letter. The studio set fades out. We are back into film again. We see O. M. Lewis in his work clothes, walking to his tractor with the letter stuffed in his pocket. Later we see his daughter and a bit of his farm. The voice explains where we are. It explains that Lewis' daughter goes to the Cambridge school as a tuition student. Twice a year, Mr. Lewis gets a tax receipt in the mail and that starts him thinking: Is his daughter getting the best kind of education in Cambridge? (says the hidden voice). Some of his neighbors, the Larkins, the Lees, the Heggens, have sent their kids to larger schools nearby. They say they get a better education there.

The function of this film sequence, and two others--one on the town banker, another on a student--is to show the school problem as a personal problem of the people in the studio. First, we demonstrate their reality as people by show-

ing them dressed in their ordinary clothes, doing their ordinary tasks. We show the banker walking his children to school, and then at the teller's window cashing a check. This man--Harry Cairns--has worked hard to become a success. If the Cambridge school closes, his business may be hurt. At the same time, he is concerned about the education his children are receiving in that school. When Harry Cairns speaks in the discussion, we will listen carefully to what he says because we know he is faced with a real problem.

If we were acquainted with Cambridge and its people, we would need no introduction to them and their problem. But we are strangers. We will only see these people for a half hour. It is necessary, therefore, to meet at least some of them quickly, to find out who they are and what their personal stake is in the problem of the town. If we know these things, then their discussion will gain in interest and meaning, and the present half hour will encompass some of the values of ten, or twenty, or thirty years of life in an Iowa small town.

After the four minute film introduction we meet our moderator. He explains that the people of Cambridge are here tonight because they have a problem. They're going to talk about it, and then they're going to make some decisions about it. But before they can make decisions, they've got to know something about the alternatives. He asks four members of the group to give the good and bad points of each of the four alternative solutions to the Cambridge school problem.[1] Then comes the introduction of our guests. Three of them tell the experiences of their towns in adopting different alternatives as solutions to the school problem. Mr. Hill speaks of his years in the Cambridge high school and gives his evaluation of his education in the light of his personal experience. Questions from the Cambridge people directed at the guests begins the real discussion period. Mrs. Vaupel, the woman from Ashton, Illinois, a town which has reorganized, proves to be our best discussion raiser, principally because her views directly oppose those of most of the Cambridge people.

Four minutes before the end of the program, Mr. Imes points out an apparatus on the wall above him. This is our "vote-board," a wooden panel with the four alternatives written on the left and four series of twelve small electric lights on the right. Mr. Imes explains that on each desk there is a panel with four buttons. Each button is labeled with an alternative. When one of the buttons is pushed, a light comes up on the board.

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1. The driving force of the program, as we saw it in the early stages of the project, was to be the whole town, moving <u>together</u> toward a solution to their problem. Thus we did not begin our dry-run discussion with the typical conflict arrangement of two speakers with opposing views. While we still feel that our basic idea of working with consensus is sound, in future shows we will make use of conflict, not as an end in itself, but as a way to provoke construction patterns of discussion.

Mr. Imes explains that they have discussed the problem, considered the alternatives, and now they must come to personal, private decisions. The alternatives are four: the town can stay-put; it can close the high school down, sending the children to other schools as tuition paying students; it can try to consolidate the small areas around it; or it can attempt to join together with three or four neighboring towns and reorganize.

"The decision is yours," says Mr. Imes. "And once you've made it, you've got to live with it and try to make it stick. But that doesn't mean that next month or next year or ten years from now you won't have to sit down and make some more decisions. That's one of the great things about living in a democracy--you've got to keep on making your own decisions."

The vote is taken. The result: eight for consolidation, three for stay-put. Had this vote been taken a month before it would have been one or two for consolidation and the rest for stay-put. In the eyes of many experts, consolidation--that is, the absorption of small rural districts--is not much different from staying put. It is a patch-work solution which was tried twenty years ago by many districts and is now antiquated. The interesting thing here is that some years ago Cambridge had a chance to consolidate with rural districts and did not, fearing that the rural areas would out-vote the town. To vote for consolidation, then, does represent a change in the minds of these people, some widening, perhaps, of their civic horizons.

The vote on the electric vote-board is an artificial device. The people of Cambridge are probably not ready to come to a decision on their problem. They may not be ready for ten, perhaps twenty years. This much, however, is true: The people of Cambridge will, sooner or later, decide what to do about their school. It may be a decision by default. No decision, that is, the decision to drift, is none the less a decision. By forcing these people to reach a provisional decision now, we are impressing on them and on the audience the fact that talking is not enough, that at some time in the future a decision must be made, and action must be taken. In this way we move forward, out of our half hour of time-present, five, ten, twenty years into the future, to demonstrate symbolically the end of the present process of discussion, even as, at the beginning of the broadcast, we reached back into time to picture the built-up values of the years which are the meaning and the heart of all decisions.

The dry-run closed circuit broadcast of November 15 proved to us that by using a professional, highly organized format, to enclose a free and spontaneous discussion, we can create a satisfying, rewarding television show.

## III - THE TOWNS TALK: A LONG VIEW

"We were going to hold the discussion down to 45 minutes, but we ended up by talking an hour and 45 minutes. It was almost impossible to stop it."

This is the statement of Carlyle Gauger, Story County Extension Agent. He is talking about the group of 35 men and women he brought together to watch our dry-run production of The Whole Town's Talking. These people had never come together before. Although they were all from Story County, they knew little about Cambridge or its school problem. They were assembled to test the effectiveness of our show in creating an atmosphere for constructive discussion. We wanted to find out if the people of Cambridge talking about their problem would stimulate other people to discuss the problems of their communities.

Mr. Gauger's report indicates that on this score the program was very successful. The discussion of the problem of school district reorganization was intense and prolonged. Many of those present thought the Cambridge people were not altogether realistic about facing up to their problem. They felt that the final vote to consolidate represented a step which might have been helpful fifteen years ago, but was out of date as a solution to present difficulties. By watching the people of Cambridge, by getting an objective view of the problems of an Iowa town, these people have, we believe, gained insight into the real issues facing their own communities.

A second reason for assembling this test group was to get reactions on the program itself. In general these reactions were favorable. The group liked the film introduction, they liked the school room setting, they liked the use of guests, they liked the vote. They liked very much the idea of bringing together people from a single town to talk over a community problem.

A number of specific criticisms were made. In general, they were as follows:

1) Film introduction seemed too long.
2) Too many guests.
3) Not enough information on the particulars of the Cambridge problem.
4) Not enough discussion.

We have shown the kinescope of the Cambridge show to a number of groups. The criticisms follow the pattern of the above statements. We feel these criticisms to be valid, and therefore we are in the process of changing and reshaping a number of elements in the format of the program.

1) The film introduction will be cut down. The number of guests will be decreased. The time allotted to free discussion will be increased.

2) The discussion will begin with statements by two individuals who have sharply conflicting points of view. No individual will be asked to give "the pros-and-cons." Each statement will be positive. We are not, therefore, removing other positions from the field of discussion. Nor are we removing the concept of the whole group working together toward a solution. But by an original polarization of attitudes we hope to speed up discussion, to focus immediately on crucial issues and to bring in more concrete facts about the problem at hand.

3) A number of smaller changes, technical in nature, will be made with a view to creating a more pointed, more dramatic "envelope" within which our free discussion will operate.

These changes in presentation will call for alterations in our pre-show process. While we will continue to have the whole group of twelve participants meet to discuss their community problem with various experts, the two people picked to start the program will receive special coaching from men who will supply them with the best facts, arguments and visual aids to support their respective positions.

An addition we are making to our pre-show process is the appointment in each participating community of a "local producer." This person will be our contact with the town, will work with the community organizations to publicize the program, will make sure that every individual in the town has access to a television set on the night of the show. We are also working out a method whereby a number of television sets can be set up in four or five rooms of the local school house, so that groups of 20 or 30 can watch the show together and afterwards hold a discussion on the issues raised.

It should be relatively easy to form such groups in towns which are actually participating in a program. The difficult, the important job is to keep such groups watching and discussing the issues brought up by the appearance of other towns on other programs. Already in Story County, the very able county agent, Carlyle Gauger, is forming discussion groups in several communities which are not directly participating in any of the shows. These "town-talk" groups will consider the issues brought up on the series of programs as they relate to their own communities. Training sessions for the leaders of such groups are being organized. Printed outlines will be prepared for pre-program distribution.

The January 3 Cambridge show features a town with a problem. Before this town can take any action it must come to a decision on that problem. If its decision is to participate in some form of reorganization it must then get together with neighboring towns and draw up a formal proposal which can be accepted or rejected by a vote of the towns. In drawing up this proposal it

would be given assistance by the county board of education which has taken various surveys and constructed a tentative county wide plan of reorganization. Our second show, on January 10, will consider the problem of the county wide plan. For this show we will go into Hardin County where the county board has made no preliminary surveys or plans. Twelve people from this county will discuss the problems of drawing up such a plan, probably with a guest from the Hardin County Board of Education. Our third show, on January 17, will feature representatives from three towns in Story County--Story City, Gilbert and Roland--and one town in Hamilton County--Randall. There has been a specific proposal made that these four towns form a reorganized district. Story City, having gone through the Cambridge process some years ago, has decided that it is for such a reorganization. The other three towns are generally against it. This third program will give each community an opportunity to explain its position and try to win over the other towns.

In this block of three programs, we start with a town with a problem, and end with a discussion of a specific proposal for a four district reorganization.

Our next block of programs will deal with the problems of Economic Interdependence. In this series of discussions we hope to continue our present format by using as participants people from Iowa towns who have personal stakes in problems involving Economic Interdependence. We may, for example, invite Iowa dairy farmers and cheese processors to discuss the problem of the importation of Danish cheese. In this case we would ask them to define the real issues, consider the alternatives and come to decisions, as individuals with special interests and as citizens with national responsibilities.

In future weeks, The Whole Town's Talking will take up other Iowa Community problems which have considerable national significance. Juvenile delinquency, gambling and law enforcement, re-apportionment, housing, are a few of the subjects which will be considered.

We have made in the last two months a small beginning. We have gotten five whole towns, Cambridge, Story City, Randall, Roland, and Gilbert talking about the problem of schools. We are in the process of getting all of Story County to talk about the problem of schools. What we have done in these towns, what we are doing in Story County, can be done in every county in Iowa. Given sufficient time and staff there is no end to the job which can be done by The Whole Town's Talking.

In our trips around the state, we have discovered many individual groups, composed of capable, sincere people attempting, with limited resources and limited knowledge, to improve the functioning of democracy in Iowa. It is possible to make The Whole Town's Talking a focus for the activities of these groups. It is possible to make this program a coordinating center for the activities of all public spirited organizations in Iowa. Perhaps the best thing

this Fund for Adult Education project can show the country is not format formula, or kinescope performances, but rather a method, a way to make television serve, in every community, the processes of our democracy.

It is impossible for us to gauge the effect our project will have on the people of Iowa. Only after exhaustive research and study will anyone be able to say what we have done. We know that there are people in Cambridge who are frankly disturbed over what is happening to the town. It is not easy to get people to think about their problems without exposing insecurities. We have, however, at this early stage, and in an informal manner, gathered up some talk. Let me give two examples.

When we asked Professor Martelle Cushman of the Iowa State College Department of Vocational Education to comment on the project as he has seen it operate, both as an advisor and as a man deeply concerned with adult education, he wrote:

> "In the first place, the procedures you have used have certainly stimulated thinking in a number of specific local communities and when the show is actually produced on the air it will stimulate the thinking of many people, not only those closely affiliated with and affected by the communities whose people will appear on the show, but also many other people within the whole WOI-TV listening area.
>
> "In the second place, the program is certainly developing a better understanding of the whole series of complex problems that constitute the total picture of school district organization in Iowa and in the nation. The problem is extremely complex and it requires the dissemination of a great deal of factual data before people have enough to think with. When the people have an understanding of the basic facts and issues they are in a position to look at their own situations more objectively and to reach whatever decisions they may ultimately have to reach with greater validity in terms of improving educational opportunities for the children, youth and adults of the state.
>
> "In the third place, I am very much interested in the project because of its promise particularly as an economizer of time and energy. I have given a general talk on the basic fundamentals on school district reorganization in more than 30 counties in Iowa, usually to an audience of 100 to 300 people. Altogether in five years I have not reached as many people as it is possible to reach in an hour or two over WOI-TV."

Or, as Harry Cairns, banker of Cambridge, Iowa, said after our first community meeting:

> "This is the best thing that's ever happened to our town."

## IV - A FINAL NOTE

The bulk of the preceeding pages was written in December after our first "dry-run" experiment. They express a vision of great prospects for a project just out of the planning stage. At the present date (February 3), we have completed our first series of five[2] programs on school district reorganization. We have gone from Cambridge, a town with a problem, to the first telecast of a state legislature in action. We are, then, in a position to measure our hopes against the reality of five live telecasts.

Between the filming of the Cambridge "dry-run" and the first live broadcast on January 3, there occurred an important clarification in the basic orientation of The Whole Town's Talking." The body of the first program was to be a town meeting type of discussion held supposedly in a classroom in the Cambridge school. Originally there was some confusion as to what "we" (WOI-TV) were doing at this "town meeting." How did "we" get there? What did "we" hope to accomplish there?

After some thought, it was decided that the role of television would be that of reporter, and the entire program become a "television report" of an issue vital to the life of an Iowa community. Each week television goes to another town to watch the people struggling with their problems, and (in the words of the narrator) "to catch the face and voice of America itself!"

As a result of this change in concept, the setting of the show has taken on a new dimension. What we see is not a small town meeting, but television covering a small town meeting. Therefore, our cameras, our equipment, our technical crew are shown freely as a part of this broader stage. There are two advantages in this procedure. The first and obvious advantage is that the number and variety of camera angles is greatly increased. The set can now be shown from all four sides, and this gives the opportunity for discussion "in the round," instead of the limited picture of flat classroom rows.

Secondly, the open acknowledgement of the cameras allows us to take advantage of television's greatest asset--dramatic "on-the-spot" coverage. The presence of cameras and technical equipment creates the impression that news is taking place, that history is being recorded, that the viewer is truly "on-the-spot."

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2. Added to the original series of three programs was a fourth dealing with the farm people who hold the crucial votes in almost all rural school elections, and a fifth broadcast from the State Capitol in Des Moines, in which members of the House and Senate School Committees discussed Iowa's school problems on a state-wide level.

The basic principle on which The Whole Town's Talking was conceived--real people discussing their own real problems--has remained unchanged. It is on this principle that, regardless of technical faults or virtues, each program stands or falls. I remember the appearance of John Dyer, the rural mailman from Cambridge, on the first program. He alone, of all the people in Cambridge, spoke up for a type of school reorganization which might mean better education for the children at the cost of losing the high school to another town.

John Dyer is an old man, past 60. He does not like to speak in public. But when he stood up and pointed his finger at the eleven other people of Cambridge and said--"What do you value, your children or your businesses?"--that was a moment of courage and conviction not easily forgotten.

Every program has produced moments such as this, moments of humour, and intensity, and above all, honesty. And there is the great virtue of The Whole Town's Talking and the source of its striking effect: These people mean what they say.

Of course, what they say is not always based on fact. This has given rise to a certain amount of criticism of the program on the grounds that by allowing ordinary people to speak their minds we are spreading ignorance and confusion. I do not wish to underestimate the validity of this type of criticism. There is undoubtedly the possibility that some people watching The Whole Town's Talking have gotten "wrong ideas" about school district reorganization.

But so long as we have faith in the principles of the democratic process, we shall have to continue in the belief that free discussion, which brings out every point of view, is the best and only way to educate the people to the wise use of their inherent right to choose their own destiny.

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Fund for Adult Education
WOI-TV

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